

Lassen County Animal Control

LASSEN COUNTY ANIMAL CONTROL PROGRAM

Response Requested: Lassen County Personnel Director

Complaints Received: Lassen County Grand Jury received the following complaints in regard to Lassen County Animal Control Program.

1. Animal Control Officer is not responding to phone calls, often does not return calls.
2. Animal Control Officer is not responding to complaints regarding dogs injuring domestic animals.
3. Animal Control Officer failed to resolve an ongoing problem of neglected horses in Litchfield area of Lassen County.
4. Animal Control Officer is not following procedures outlined in the Lassen County Animal Control Ordinance.
5. Animal Control Officer overstated the number of contact with Lassen County Deputies serving Westwood area.

Findings: An investigation into the public complaints and procedures utilized by Lassen County Animal Control was conducted during the 2003/04 term of the Lassen County Grand Jury.

The Grand Jury findings are as follows:

1. The Animal Control Officer position is under the Department of public works. The control and supervision is direct line from the Director of the Department of public works. Animal Control answers through a direct supervisor to the Director.
2. Animal Control Officer's office is located on the 2nd floor of the county building at 707 Nevada Street, Susanville.

3. Animal Control is dispatched through a private answering service and also maintains radio contact while in the field through the Department of public works radio system.
4. Animal Control Officer also utilizes a cell phone while working.

Lassen County Grand Jury inquired into the use and effectiveness of the private answering service used by the Animal Control Officer. We found the answering service prompt in response and conveying information to the Animal Control Officer. The answering slips that are filled out by the service were reviewed and found adequate for the Animal Control Officer to have sufficient information to return calls and have some idea of what the call was about. However, the service told us that at times the information is the bare minimum if the slips are filled out during high priority times such as when they are dispatching the ambulance or other emergency personnel. The answering service said the Animal Control Officer stops by each morning and picks up the note slips. The answering service did provide a number of slips that had not been picked up for some reason. Three of these slips noted, 2nd call, had not been called back. The service did say that when animal control did not pick those up the info was given by phone to animal control. Animal Control Officer stated she had found the information relayed by the private service accurate, some times not all the information, but phone numbers and a short statement were provided.

The Animal Control Officer also maintains a recorder on her Office phone that she checks on a regular basis. She also utilizes the Public Works radio system that covers Lassen County and a cell phone that she is able to use to call for assistance to the Sheriff's Office. The Animal Control Officer is well equipped with communication equipment. The Grand Jury received

numerous complaints about the Animal Control Officer failing to return calls and respond to calls. The Grand Jury called the phone number for the Animal Control Officer requesting a call back, twice. After several days the Director of Public Works was called, and only then did the Grand Jury receive a call back from the Animal Control Officer.

Lassen County Grand Jury reviewed complaints that the Animal Control Officer failed to respond to domestic stock being injured by dogs. Grand Jury determined that on several occasions' calls to the Animal Control Officer about dogs killing domestic stock, sheep and goats were diverted to the Federal Predator Control Agent. These calls were reported to Lassen County Animal Control Officer as dogs killing stock. Animal Control made no investigation into the circumstances or the cause of the damage prior to handing the problem over to the Federal Agent whose responsibility is wild animals. After investigations by the Federal Agent he had determined the cause was domestic dogs, and in some cases the neighbors dog(s), this information was forwarded to the Animal Control Officer who did not respond. This occurred several times over the past two years.

Lassen County Grand Jury received numerous complaints about an individual in the Litchfield Area of Lassen County not properly taking care of horses. The horses appeared to be in very poor condition, malnourished. These complaints alleged that this problem had been ongoing for several years without resolve. The Sheriff's Office had investigated one or two complaints about not feeding the horses over the past few years and had found feed available for the stock. Several recent complaints were directed to Lassen County Animal Control Office that the horses were underfed and animal control would not call them back about the problem nor do anything

about it. The Grand Jury discovered veterinary report from ten years ago that horses belong to the owner in the recent complaint were undernourished. The horses look bad, but the Grand Jury is not an expert. Lassen County Animal Control Officer refused to provide copies of the vet reports that were supposedly done during the recent investigation and refused to answer questions regarding this situation.

Grand Jury received complaints related to the response and procedure followed by the Animal Control Officer in regard to dog bites and potential serious situations with dogs. The correct procedure, as outlined to the Grand Jury by the Director of Public Works is: Animal Control Officer is to physically respond to the dog bite location. If a doctor treats the victim the County Ordinance requires the treating physician to complete the dog bite report and forward it to Animal Control or County Health Officer. If the person is not treated by a physician then the Animal Control Officer is to complete the dog bite report. The Officer is to determine what dog was involved and who is the owner.

The Officer is then required to pick up the dog, place it into quarantine and determine if it is current with rabies shots. Also, it is the Officer's responsibility to issue citations as needed. The Grand Jury found that in practice the following procedure was used in at least one incident. The reporting party was called back by the Animal Control Officer and told to take the victim to the doctor and be sure the doctor filled out the bite report. The Officer then called the dog's owner and requested they take their dog to the pound to be quarantined. The Officer did not respond to the location. Lassen County Sheriff's Office is called on many instances of dog bites and dangerous situations with dogs. The Sheriff's Office contacts the Animal Control Office if the call is during her duty hours. If the Animal Control

Officer cannot be contacted, the Sheriff's Office handles the call and then forwards the information to the Animal Control Officer. Depending on the gravity of the situation the Sheriff's Deputies may respond even when Animal Control Officer is on duty. The Animal Control Officer told the Grand Jury that the Sheriff's Office does not provide her with the information when they respond. The Grand Jury found this statement in question.

The Animal Control Officer told the Grand Jury that she "patrols" Westwood once a week and each time she contact the Sheriff's Deputies. When she is picking up a dog she has the Sheriff's Deputy stand by to prevent any problems. Lassen County Sheriff's Deputy assigned to Westwood provided the information that he has been called to stand by for Animal Control on two occasions over the past five years. He said that they see the Animal Control truck in Westwood, but the Animal Control Officer does not check in with the Sheriff's Office with any regularity. Overall, law enforcement officers and those professionals within the county that work with or near the Lassen County Animal Control Officer, respond when questioned, that the Lassen County Animal Control Officer's reputation is not good as it relates to the quality of her work.

Lassen County Grand Jury received complaints that a potentially dangerous situation with a large dog frequenting a school bus stop used by elementary grade children was not investigated. The Grand Jury found that a large dog was frequenting a bus stop and calls from the school bus driver and residents near the bus stop went un-retuned and un-investigated. The dog eventually bit one of the children and the situation was then resolved.

Lassen County Grand Jury also found that Lassen County has no method of tracking dog licensing, other than discovery of unlicensed dogs

through the course of the work performed by Animal Control. Computer programs are available to track dog licensing and rabies vaccinations.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Lassen County Animal Control is a regulatory office, i.e. issues citations and takes enforcement action on situations under its authority. It is currently under the umbrella of the Department of Public Works, an agency responsible for county roads and infrastructure. The goals of these two county responsibilities are not compatible. The responsibility of Animal Control needs to be transferred to the Agriculture Department or the Sheriff's Office. The Agriculture Department has some regulatory responsibility and the Sheriff's Office is regulatory in nature. The Agriculture Department now administers the Federal Program for Predator Control and Animal Control is compatible with this activity. The transfer of Animal Control to the Sheriff's Office is the strongest recommendation. It has been found that the Animal Control Office is in need of close direct supervision to ensure that the work is within County Policy and Ordinances. The monies expended on private dispatch, \$2,781.75 for fiscal year 2002/03, should be added to the Sheriff's budget to provide dispatch and control of the Animal Control Officer activities. The Sheriff's Office has sufficient direct line supervision to bring this program up to present standards and see that the residents of Lassen County are getting their money's worth. It is also recommended that trained law enforcement personnel investigate all violations of Penal Code section 597, Cruelty to Animals.

Lassen County Grand Jury recommends that Lassen County install a dog licensing system that will enable the county to follow dog licensing and rabies compliance. Lassen County should strive to maintain that classification. With computer programs dog owners could be reminded of licenses and rabies renewal along with locations and times that licenses can

be renewed. This would also give Lassen County the ability to issue dog licenses through the mail and possibly the Lassen County Web Page. The last year that a count was available on the number of licenses issued, was 2002 with 1203 licenses. It is currently estimated the 1250 licenses were issued for 2003. This number is believed to be very small percentage of dogs in Lassen County that are required to be licensed. Full compliance would add substantial funds to the Animal Control Program and improve the rabies vaccination percentage.